Topics: Genetic Manipulation and Morality

By AMITAI ETZIONI

The acceleration of biological engineering has been urged before Congress by Nobel Laureate Dr. Joshua Lederberg. He has called for the establishment of a National Genetics Task Force to increase the momentum of efforts aimed at unlocking the genetic code of man. Such a breakthrough in biology could lead to the prevention of many illnesses whose origin is wholly or partially in the genetic code.

There is much to be said in favor of such a task force. But it ought to be accompanied by a task force on the social and moral consequences of genetic manipulation. The imminent breakthroughs in biology may affect man as much or more as he was affected by previous revolutions in engineering and physics: the imposition of a new set of capacities, of freedoms, of choices society must make, of evil it can inflict.

Gene manipulation may also allow man to tamper with biological elements which heretofore had to be accepted, including the sex of children to be conceived, their features and color, and ultimately their race, energy levels, and perhaps even their IQ's. Thus, what may start as the biological control of illnesses could become an attempt to breed supermen. While this may appeal to some, think about the agonizing problems if man has to act as the creator and fashion the image of man.

Shopping for Genes

What supermen will the national task force order? Blond or brown, white or black? Highly charged or low-keyed? More males? And, who will make all these decisions — the parents shopping for genes in the supermarket, again expecting society to pick up the bill for the aggregate effects of individual decisions? Or, a Government agency, a task-force?

Fortunately, it seems we do not have to stop the genetic combat of illness to prevent genetic engineering for racist purposes. Contrary to widely held beliefs, studies show that the energy of science may be guided into one area to the relative neglect of others. It is generally thought that scientific work requires that the scientist follow any lead his investigating spirit encounters and which may take him any place. The findings of a sub-discipline of a field trickle freely into the others: hence, one kind of genetic manipulation will willy-nilly open the door to others.

Actually, most scientific findings are not readily transferable, and their application is affected by moral taboos. Next to no work is carried out in the psychology needed to develop subliminal advertising, and those scientists who sought to prove racist theories are starved for funds and academic recognition.

Before such guiding of scientific efforts can be effectively applied to the new genetics, we must have a clearer notion of the moral and social choices involved in the biological revolution and the mechanisms by which science can be guided without being stifled.

Explore the Options

Let us not again sail blindly into a storm unleashed by scientists anxious to unlock all of nature's secrets with little concern for who and what will be blown over in the resulting tidal waves.

To this end, I suggest that at least 1 per cent of the $10-million a year requested for National Genetics Task Force be set aside to explore the options genetic engineering is about to impose on us.

Amitai Etzioni is Chairman of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University and Director of the Center for Policy Research.